



## Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching

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### *Self-directed learning as related to learning strategies, self-regulation, and autonomy in an English language program: A local application with global implications*

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#### Abstract

English language tutoring and/or self-access centers are services commonly offered as curricular support to English language program students in educational environments worldwide. This paper argues that the theory of self-directed learning (SDL) from the field of adult education should be considered alongside the equally-important areas of language learning strategies, learner autonomy, and self-regulated learning in the setup of these types of tutoring/self-access academic support centers. The proposition is examined by applying it to a particular case in an English language program of a major research university in the southeastern United States. The paper explicates the commonly-known theory of SDL (Grow, 1991) and relates it to models by put forward by Nakata (2010) and Oxford (2011, 2107). Empirical evidence from studies on encouraging SDL for English language study is summarized from a range of research projects conducted worldwide, and the author concludes by offering implications for educators in any institution-based, adult English language program.

**Keywords:** self-directed learning; language learning strategies; self-regulation; autonomy; adult education; English language program

## 1. Introduction

Second and foreign language (L2) learning strategies have been at the center of research and practice for many years now in the field of English language teaching. Developments in understanding language learning strategies (LLS), as well as areas very closely related to learning strategies, such as self-regulation and autonomy, still have much to offer the second language learner and teacher. There is an important area of theoretical knowledge, research, and practice that is extremely close to language learning strategies, as well as to self-regulation and autonomy, but that has received insufficient attention in our field, that is, self-directed learning (SDL).

Although it is possible to compare Gerald Grow's (1991) SDL model in rigorous detail to various other SDL models, the focus here is primarily on his model, because it is the best-known, the most carefully constructed, the clearest in terms of process, and the most relevant to the L2 field. Early in the article I touch on SDL ideas and research by other educational experts besides Grow, but this article clearly centers on his work as it might inform the L2 field. For the sake of this special issue on L2 learning strategies, I compare Grow's model to other L2 learning models and related research, with a special concern for conceptual relationships involving strategies, autonomy, and self-regulation. It is time to draw SDL, specifically as embodied in Grow's model, into meaningful conversations among L2 learning theorists. That is one of the purposes of this article. Another purpose is to show how these ideas may influence teaching and operations in an English language program, especially within a tutoring or self-access center, and to offer implications for other English programs around the globe.

Many English language programs housed in institutions worldwide offer some form of a language learning computer lab, tutoring center, or self-access center in which their English-learning students can come and receive additional help via a tutor with a certain skill, or can tackle extra practice with the aid of a computer software program. Following this pattern, the English Language Programs Department of the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), a significant, urban, research university in the southeastern United States, has recently added a learning resource center to the profile of services available to its English language students. This learning resource center has been designed to offer three different types of services, which are in line with services available at similar labs/centers worldwide: (1) one-on-one individualized tutoring, in both English skill areas and in undergraduate or graduate coursework areas for specific pre-matriculation programs; (2) workshops that all students will be able to take that focus on general academic study skill topics, such as library-research skills and various citation requirements in research writing; and (3) computer-assisted language learning (CALL), using technologies such as software designed for independent

study, for extra practice. Throughout this paper, I will be discussing the applicability of SDL theory and research to this particular situation, but readers are encouraged to keep in mind that this case can be applied to the model of tutoring/self-access centers used globally in a wide variety of English language programs.

As the English Language Programs' leadership team at UAB engaged in discussions on the services that will be offered at the learning resource center, the idea of building in opportunities for independent language study kept coming to the surface of planning sessions. Without direct teacher leadership, it did not seem to be a realistic possibility. In other words, I wondered if the very notion of studying independently, in a center set aside for the purpose of tutoring, would even make sense. However, as I have been exposed to theories of SDL in the field of adult education, I have considered the possible applicability of the SDL concepts to the learning resource center model. I have also thought about the intersection of SDL with the body of research on L2 learning strategies and learner autonomy, specifically Oxford's model (2011, 2017) of strategic self-regulation (S<sup>2</sup>R), with which I am most familiar. In this paper, I will explore four ideas.

- I will seek to define SDL, with special emphasis on Grow's (1991) model of SDL for use by educators, in an effort to understand how it may apply to the learning resource center plans at my university and elsewhere.
- I will explore intersections of Grow's (1991) model with the basic tenets of Oxford's (2011, 2017) strategic self-regulation model, as well as widely-held notions of L2 learning strategy development for English-language learning.
- I will investigate how SDL has already been applied and researched in the context of adult English language learners in our field and will determine what can be gained from that for this context.
- Finally, if SDL does seem to be applicable to a support structure such as the learning resource center, I will articulate what guiding principles I should take to our team and share with others outside of UAB.

## 2. SDL definitions and theories with special emphasis on Grow's (1991) model

Before continuing, to ensure that terms used throughout this paper are easily understood, I provide their definitions in Figure 1. I will then expound on these terms further. It should be noted at the very outset that the definition of self-directed learning mentions strategies and is conceptually close to the other terms, that is, learner autonomy, self-regulation, strategic self-regulation, and L2 learning strategies. Grow's interest in strategies is strong, as evidenced by his 1994 paper, which focuses on cognitively-focused strategic reading. The article traces a major theoretical shift in our comprehension of reading, moving away from the passive reader

and toward the strategic reader, who selects what, when, and how to read, reads interpretively, and understands the organized structure of a given reading passage. In fact, many of the reading strategies mentioned in Grow's (1994) article are included in Oxford's (2017) book on language learning strategies. The article closes with recommendations on how to write for such readers.

- *Self-directed learning* is, briefly put, a process in which individuals take the initiative to diagnose learning needs, set goals for meeting those needs, figure out resources and strategies to make learning happen, and evaluate the process (based on Knowles, 1975).
- *Learner autonomy* means that the learner relies on processes for taking responsibility for his or her learning (Oxford, 2016, 2017).
- *Self-regulation* means that a learner has the capacity to change his or her actions or goals to achieve desired results (based on Zeidner, Boekaerts, & Pintrich, 2000).
- *Strategic self-regulation* is the use of learning strategies as part of self-regulation or for increasing one's self-regulation (Oxford, 2017).
- *L2 learning strategies* are complex, dynamic, purposeful, conscious, mental actions or processes that self-regulated learners use to plan, conduct, and/or evaluate their task performance and enhance L2 proficiency (based on Oxford, 2017).

Figure 1 Basic definitions of key terms (more detailed definitions are provided in subsequent parts of the article)

## 2.1. Theoretical definitions of SDL and comments on learner autonomy

Figure 1 provided a simple definition of SDL, and now I will go more deeply into the topic. Well-known definitions and theories of SDL tend to mention learning strategies and autonomy and imply a dynamic process, not a static product. Definitions and research on SDL first began emerging in the field of adult education studies, primarily in the 1970s. Merriam and Bierema (2014) explained that the chief proponent of andragogy (i.e., adult learning), Malcolm Knowles, felt that adults "become increasingly self-directed" as they mature, and that "SDL is a hallmark of adult learning" (p. 62). In fact, the description of SDL provided by Knowles is still considered useful. In *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*, Knowles (1975) explained that self-directed learners, alone or with assistance, take the initiative to diagnose their learning needs, establish goals, identify resources, *choose and implement relevant learning strategies*, and evaluate outcomes (cited in Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 63, emphasis added). Similarly, Tough (1978) described a process that learners move through that begins with deciding what to learn and what resources are needed for that learning, followed by deciding where to study and how they will maintain motivation for studying. Tough (1978) explained that the process for learners also includes setting goals, timelines, and the pace of study, figuring out their current level of knowledge compared to what they wanted to learn, and evaluating themselves formatively along the way (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

For students who are already fairly autonomous in their learning, understanding the concept of SDL may help them self-analyze the steps that they undertake and perhaps make changes or introduce enhancements. However, for those who cannot imagine such a process, either because of educational or cultural background, or perhaps because SDL may actually seem to be a personal attribute of some learners, rather than a learning process (it is both; see Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 63), it may be appropriate to consider how to teach students self-direction. Merriam and Bierema also concluded on the basis of the study of adults in higher education conducted by Raidal and Volet (2009) that “guiding students towards greater learning *autonomy* for social and self-directed learning is imperative for continuous lifelong learning post-graduation” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 73, emphasis added). Thus, it is arguable that a tutoring/self-access resource center at an English language program such as the learning resource center at UAB should train students to become learners who are increasingly self-directed. In addition, this aspect may actually be necessary for student success, since the skills for SDL will likely aid students in their English and university studies, especially in many academic environments where learner autonomy reigns as a key characteristic.

Incidentally, for the purposes of this paper, it is worthwhile to take a moment to discuss the use of the term *learner autonomy*, which has been mentioned several times so far in this article. As Merriam and Bierema point out, “Autonomy is synonymous with self-directedness” (2014, p. 147). That statement could be parsed further, but it holds true at least for the purposes of this paper. Autonomy in language learning refers to the learner’s taking responsibility for his or her own learning (Oxford, 2016, 2017). Researchers also agree that autonomy is acquired in steps, that there are differing levels of autonomy, that students can be guided along the path towards increased autonomy by the leadership of teachers or coaches, and that there can be both individual and social (group-oriented) autonomy, depending on context (Oxford, 2016). Therefore, in the rest of this discussion I will consider SDL and learner autonomy to be very close in meaning, and I will use the two terms rather interchangeably moving forward.

## 2.2. Grow’s (1991) process model of SDL stages

Considering the cultural differences found in English language program students worldwide, and equally considering that not everyone necessarily has a natural propensity for SDL, how would a tutoring/self-access center such as the learning resource center promote the development of learner autonomy in its students? Grow’s (1991) model for SDL proves to be an instructive tool for this process. Rather than defining SDL, or describing the stages of SDL, Grow’s model actually

describes a process for educators to guide students towards being more self-directed in their learning. Grow's thinking typically emphasizes dynamic processes, no matter what the setting or topic. For instance, one of his articles, "Back to school with Gerald Grow: The principles of design and their shadow" (Grow, 2010), critiqued some well-known design principles, which experts had often misrepresented to the public as scientific laws but which were actually rigid, one-sided fears of mass chaos. Grow's critique implied that the principles ignored process, which is a crucial element in his concepts concerning SDL.

The development of Grow's staged self-directed learning model (SSDL), which I henceforth refer to as his *SDL model* for ease of communication, was explicated in his 1991 article for *Adult Education Quarterly*. The process began with a series of frustrating teaching attempts and observations that Grow made with his own students as a journalism professor. Grow based his model on the four stages of management, first described by Hersey and Blanchard, which involves matching management practices to employee ability and willingness to do a certain task (1988, cited in Grow, 1991). However, rather than relating to business management, Grow's model is explicitly for teachers, and it matches guidance by the classroom teacher to student ability and willingness to function at a certain level of autonomy.

In Grow's model, the instructor must be aware of the level of autonomy of the learner and adjust his or her instruction to meet that level. As Grow explained, "What is 'good teaching' for one learner in one stage of development may not be 'good teaching' for another student . . . at a different stage of development" (1991, p. 140). Every stage of learning self-direction must be balanced by the teacher's relative power in the classroom, according to the learner's readiness. And since the teacher is the leader in the quest to make students become more self-directed, the responsibility to understand the stages of becoming more self-directed is on the educator, in order to wisely and sensitively lead (Grow, 1991). The model "proposes a way in which teachers can be vigorously influential while empowering students toward greater autonomy" (Grow, 1991, p. 128). Also noteworthy is that Grow directly indicated that although SDL is frequently examined in an informal learning context, his model is purposefully designed for the formal classroom environment. The stages of SDL development are outlined below.

### *Stage One*

Grow's first stage is enacted when the learner is still dependent on an authority. Stage One learners are those who, either through lack of motivation or through profound respect for the teacher, are extremely teacher-oriented in learning tasks. They have no, or little, self-direction. With these learners, teachers must

be coaches. Teachers need to be expert leaders in the classroom. Stereotypical teacher behaviors such as lecturing, drilling, only giving few choices, and thoroughly providing introductory material to a topic are all part of this role expectation. The focus is on the subject and mastery thereof; however it is the teacher who defines it. Grading is objective and clearly spelled out in advance. Immediate feedback is helpful. Grow said that the aim here should be to “provide clear-cut objectives and straightforward techniques for achieving them” (1991, p. 130). He also recommended setting high standards, and then guiding the students to meet those standards, saying that the teacher should “create and reward success” (1991, p. 130). Certainly, one could argue that some learners are beyond this stage from the start, but it does likely describe the starting place of a majority of learners from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Grow explained that although Stage One methodologies are frequently rejected by many educators, they have popular appeal, and many coaches, music teachers, and other teachers where drill-oriented mastery must be gained still regularly use this approach, even if not for the purposes of teaching self-directed learning (Grow, 1991). It should also be added that teacher-centered classrooms are the norm in much of the world, and so many students from different educational cultures will come to an educational environment as Stage One learners, because it is what a good learner in their culture is supposed to be. This can be respected, while at the same time the benefits of learner autonomy can be forwarded.

### *Stage Two*

A Stage Two learner in Grow’s (1991) model brings interest in the subject to the classroom, as well as a measure of confidence. Consequently, the teacher of this type of learner “brings enthusiasm and motivation to the class, sweeping learners along with the excitement of learning” (1991, p. 131). Learners at this stage will follow the teacher’s direction if they understand why the teacher is leading in a certain way and if the teacher also gives assistance and aid when needed. Learners in Stage Two will also respond if they simply have a positive rapport with the teacher. Helping students set and attain goals becomes a primary focus of the teacher, as it sets the stage for the development of autonomous learning perspectives (Grow, 1991). Teachers can also help students grow in the application of specific learning strategies. As a guide to learning, rather than a coach as in Stage One, the teacher inspires the students to apply the basics of the subject in an interesting way (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Grow (1991) instructs the teacher at this stage to give students praise, but with an intentionality to use it less, instead replacing it with encouragement. This moves the student from working from extrinsic motivation, or working primarily to gain the teacher’s approval,

to intrinsic motivation, arising from an understanding that the student him/herself can handle the work (Dörnyei, 2001).

Examples of techniques that relate to Stage Two are engaging lectures followed by teacher-led discussion, a demonstration of a new technique followed by guided practice, and structured projects with close supervision by the teacher and considerable feedback. A helpful, specific example of this stage that Grow provided is that of a Shakespearean literature class: the students are carried along at first by the teacher's enthusiasm and knowledge of the subject until they have enough skill to try to delve into the texts themselves, which they then do with guidance and encouragement. If the students do not develop the motivation to try to make sense of the text themselves, then the literature teacher will have ultimately failed. Thus, the primary characteristic of this Stage Two can be achieved by balancing "strong personal interaction" together with a "strong focus on subject matter" (Grow, 1991, p. 132).

### *Stage Three*

The third of Grow's (1991) SDL stages moves the teacher towards being a facilitator of learning, entering a partnership with the learner to assist their efforts towards mastery of a subject. A Stage Three learner has knowledge and skills, but he or she also lacks the knowledge and/or motivation to go forward independently. For this reason, a learner in this stage is a true partner in the learning process, desiring a partnership and companions on the learning journey. A Stage Three learner wants to apply what is learned to a real-life problem. For this reason, this is also an ideal stage for group problem-solving projects and collaborative learning. A learner at Stage Three also wants to negotiate topics, assignments, and assessments, he or she wants to be set up and let go for a time and then to receive feedback, and then he or she wants to be set up again for the next steps, and let out again for more. Grow says that students at this stage develop "critical thinking, individual initiative, and a sense of themselves as co-creators of the culture that shapes them" (1991, p. 133). For all of these reasons, at this stage, Grow explained that the teacher comes the closest to being a true participant in the learning experience. Students and teachers share in making decisions about the learning process. This can be a very rewarding stage for an instructor.

Students in Stage Three thrive in structured but open projects that may include "written criteria, learning contracts, and evaluation checklists," which can help learners "evaluate their own progress" (Grow, 1991, p. 133). Then, as the students become more competent at self-direction, they can be freed increasingly to set their own goals and pace. At this point, the teacher remembers at all times that the point is to move the student to greater independence. A



strong example of a Stage Three assignment would be a group project that is approved by and facilitated by an instructor, moving even to student-developed and student-directed projects by the end of the stage. Grow (1991) also mentioned that students at this stage particularly benefit from measures that involve an outside standard, such as accreditation guidelines, rather than internal standards imposed by the instructor.

### *Stage Four*

Stage Four in Grow's (1991) SDL model is that of a highly self-directed learner. Students at this stage will use expert, outside resources, or other materials to pursue their learning, but the learners can and will set their own goals and standards. As Merriam and Bierema (2014) explained, a highly self-directed learner is "able to plan, execute, and evaluate" (p. 70) his or her own learning. Simply put, they are able to take responsibility for their own learning. Grow (1991) explained that self-directed learners "exercise skills in time management, project management, goal setting, self-evaluation, peer critique, information gathering, and use of educational resources" (p. 134). Thus, the role of the teacher in this stage is quite different from earlier; it is that of a consultant, a mentor, or even – in some situations – a delegator. It is not, however, to teach subject matter; it is to "cultivate" the student's "own personal empowerment" (Grow, 1991, p. 135). A teacher in a formal educational environment at this stage may hold meetings to ensure accountability, consult with students to develop criteria or evaluative tools, and encourage cooperation and collaboration between learners. They may offer expertise as needed, or monitor as needed, but at all times they are fostering autonomy. A Stage Four teacher will help students "focus on both the process and product of learning" (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 70), so that students will not only accomplish their goals, but will also be further along on the road of understanding their skills in SDL. Interestingly, Grow mentioned that the relationship between the teacher and learner in this stage is "distinctly not intense," and that the focus is on the student and the task, or the student and the world, or even the student and other students. Of these possible foci, "the learner's own efforts become the unequivocal focus" (p. 135).

Examples of Stage Four learning are easy to imagine in informal contexts. In formal educational contexts, the following are all illustrations of Stage Four learning projects: cumulative research projects, dissertation research, conference presentations and colloquia, independent studies, serious creation of blogs and websites, contributions to and publication of literary magazines, and journal article publication. Graduate professors frequently function in the role of a Stage Four teacher, as the focus of the learning is the student's work. Grow also mentions, in

a point which is significant to this paper, that mentors, writing coaches, and consultants can function in Stage Four roles. The key point is that for a Stage Four teacher, the goal is to become, truly and ultimately, unnecessary (Grow, 1991).

Grow discussed implications of his SDL model for overall curriculum design in his article. He also helpfully described how the approach can organize even one class meeting of a course, in which students develop from a very dependent stage at the beginning, learning a new concept, all the way through to working with the material in a very independent manner. Grow explained, "the teacher can demonstrate a skill, coach them through using the skill, facilitate their application of it, and then have them work in groups to create new situations in which to practice the skill on each other" (1991, p. 144). This reminds me of the "presentation, practice, and production" model that is heavily used in many English language programs even now to guide classroom practice and lesson building. In addition, with respect to the issue of having students coming from educational environments where Stage One is the norm for learners, Grow provided the following encouragement: "Even teachers of adults . . . may need to approach certain learners in a directive, even authoritarian style, then gradually equip those learners with the skills, self-concept, and motivation necessary to pursue learning in a more self-directed manner" (1991, p. 140).

Can Grow's (1991) SDL approach be applied in a real-life situation, considering that students in any given classroom are likely at different self-direction stages when entering a learning environment? Grow addressed this situation by indicating that his model can be used in a non-linear and iterative way, or through *looping*, which is realistic considering the range of differences in any group of students. Grow (1991, p. 145) explained that *looping* may be a more effective way to use the concept than a "sequence of linear stages," in which a teacher bases lesson design on the stage that he or she feels characterizes the majority of students, and then loops around to earlier or later stages during the lesson, depending on the needs of the students and what the lesson activities are.

The following is an example of looping through Grow's (1991) SDL stages, as it might be implemented in an English language classroom during a single lesson. A teacher might start a class with an exploration activity, such as having students examine a certain text's use of verb tenses to try to deduce the meaning conveyed – a Stage Three activity. Then, the teacher could move back to a Stage Two demonstration/lecture of the new verb tense under examination, followed by further Stage Two teacher-led guided practice in analyzing form, meaning, and use of the new tense. At any point that students are uncomfortable or hesitant, the teacher could re-claim teacher-fronted authority for the sake of a detailed and formal explanation (Stage One). Finally, the teacher could release the students

with a homework assignment that requires application of the verb tense in real life, with interactive journaling on a class-managed blog afterwards in which students give each other feedback on the use of the new grammar form (Stage Three, or even Stage Four, depending on design). Of course, the model is flexible enough to implement throughout the course, rather than only in an individual class.

In my own work, I have seen evidence that some spirited, intelligent, motivated, and dynamic students seem to skip Stage One and, in some cases, even Stage Two. Such exceptional students, rather than their teachers, might be leaders in SDL. They might have surpassed the aims that their teachers hold for them and might occasionally be more autonomous than their teachers. Many of these excellent students might rapidly wish to co-lead their own autonomy progression along with their teachers (Stage Three). Grow (1991), who was fully dedicated to addressing the needs of individual learners, would understand this very well. His concern for specific learners was emphasized in another publication (Grow, 2006), which conceptualized why certain individual students have particular attention patterns (various forms of “active academic disengagement”) that are not found in some other students and that lead teachers to label the actively disengaged students as difficult to teach. The article offered good ways of responding to individual student differences. Grow implied that his way of dealing with students’ attentional differences was more useful than theories of learning styles or cultural styles. I suspect that this kind of thinking about individual differences in attention would be extremely valuable to L2 teachers and would improve L2 classes for students.

Moving back to the 1991 SDL article, Grow’s explanation of his well-known, well-respected model ended with asking multiple questions that could blast holes in the model. He humbly declared that it is simply a model, to be held up to scrutiny, discussed, and interrogated. However, I – along with many others – would say that it is highly useful, flexible, and powerful model, especially if used as a guide for our efforts at UAB in an investigation of what would work to promote SDL in the learning resource center. In fact, the model holds promise for many different settings.

### 3. Strategic self-regulation and language learning autonomy

For several decades now, there has been a lively conversation surrounding language learning strategies in the general field of English language teaching research. Rebecca L. Oxford’s groundbreaking text from 1990, *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*, paved the way for increasingly lively conversations and much research on how to help learners understand and make use of specific strategies to study a second or foreign language. Defining LLS, identifying them, categorizing them, assessing their use, figuring out how

to teach students to enhance their use of them – all these and more have been the focus of multiple studies through past years. Oxford's latest strategy books, published in 2011 and 2017 provide assistance in navigating the theoretical waters around the topic. Oxford's (2011, 2017) model of strategic self-regulation (S<sup>2</sup>R) seeks to condense and clarify the theoretical landscape, including how three primary areas of strategies have emerged in the research (i.e., cognitive, affective, and sociocultural-interactive), how meta-strategies play a guiding role in the use of strategies, and how individual strategies themselves can be linked together in *strategy chains*. Behind all of this are some primary assumptions about the language learner and strategy instruction, which are of import to this paper.

First, the use of LLS moves ownership of language learning to the learner and is commonly linked to learner autonomy (Oxford, 2016). The learner is not a vessel simply dependent on the input of language knowledge from the teacher, but instead is an active, participatory negotiator of his or her own learning, strategically selecting ways in which to control and reinforce learning to maximize impact of the teacher's efforts and time spent in class. Oxford commented that research is consistent in the observation that the strategic language learner has "active control" of strategies, and that the "key for such learners is choosing appropriate strategies for the purpose and situation and evaluating the success of these strategies" (2011, p. 14).

To have active control, however, and to make conscious selections of strategies to use, it is beneficial to have overtly learned strategies. Even for the student who has benefitted from a rich educational tradition that has implicitly taught strategy use, explicit training in the myriad of strategies available is useful. In addition, since so much of the learning strategy tradition has focused on cognitive strategies, the understanding of the roles of affective and sociocultural-interactive LLS can only increase a student's adept selection of the right strategy for the right situation. The good news is that, as shown by research, strategies are teachable (cf. Chamot, 2004; Cohen, 2014; Plonsky, 2011; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). Understanding that a learner can develop autonomy over their range of LLS and self-regulate choosing the appropriate strategy for the appropriate time is the "soul of learning strategies" (Oxford, 2017, p. 65). Indeed, the autonomy that a self-regulated learner possesses is characterized by action – cognitive, emotional, and social, including goal-setting (Oxford, 2017).

Another important pointer from Oxford's S<sup>2</sup>R model is that research "indicates that the more explicit the strategy instruction, the more successful it is" (2011, p. 181). Multiple levels of explicitness exist. The first level is *blind strategy instruction*, in which the learner merely does the task following the steps noted by the teacher (or just does the task without aid). This teacher might have certain learning strategies in mind but does not name, demonstrate, or explain

those strategies or foster their use. The highest level, on which I am focusing here, is *completely informed strategy instruction*, in which the instructor names the strategy, demonstrates it, explains how and when to use it, and then helps students to consciously reflect on, evaluate, and, if needed, transfer the strategy to other tasks (Oxford, 2011). Between the two extremes are levels that encourage various degrees of strategic consciousness on the part of the learner. Naturally, the teacher's best effort at strategy instruction cannot "cause" strategic consciousness for any given learner, because learners are not all alike.

Also of relevance to teaching students self-direction is the notion that strategy instruction can be differentiated. Oxford (2017) explains that differentiation can occur in several ways, specifically by attending to the following: sensory preferences for learning, cognitive style, strategies that a student already uses, the level of proficiency that a student has with strategy use, as well as interests and goals. While there are certain challenges to completely individualizing strategy instruction in a formal classroom environment, a tutoring center, with its built-in, one-on-one model and the possibility for working with the same student over time, does lend itself to the possibility of strategy use assessment and differentiation on multiple levels.

What is the relationship of Oxford's (2011, 2017) S<sup>2</sup>R model to Grow's (1991) model for SDL? Firstly, if I argue that we should teach students to be self-directed in their L2 learning, then strategy instruction must be part of the training. Oxford (2017) offered an interesting explication of how autonomy (i.e., self-governance, having self-responsibility), agency (i.e., the sense of being an origin of many of one's own actions, rather than merely a pawn that gets pushed around), and self-regulation (i.e., the capacity to choose to regulate emotions and thoughts) are interdependent, having great overlap and that there are no contradictions between them. She subsequently explained how each of these three phenomena have direct application to language learning strategies. SDL is characterized by autonomy and self-regulation. In a language-learning environment, therefore, if we are teaching self-direction, it is reasonable to also teach the use of LLS as a critical partner in the process.

It is also worthwhile to note some specific overlap between the theoretical foundations drawn on by the two scholars, although more ties could certainly be identified. Firstly, Grow (1991) insisted that the instructor must be aware of the stage of the learner and adjust the level of instruction to self-directedness accordingly. In the same vein, Oxford explained that "strategy assistance is useful at levels as long as it is tailored to learners' needs" (2011, p. 175). We can conclude that assessment of both the level of readiness for SDL and of the awareness or use of LLS, would be useful as a precursor to working with a student on these skills. Next, Grow's model acknowledged that explicit leadership on the part of an instructor

can play a significant role in helping a student develop self-directedness. Research into LLS demonstrates the same. As Oxford (2011) explained, “classroom strategy instruction can help by identifying ways in which learners already take responsibility for their learning, the strategies they currently use, and ways that an expanded range of strategies – and greater learner responsibility and control – can help them become more confident and proficient” (p. 182). I would add that the knowledgeable leadership of a tutor in a self-access center or a language learning lab could add to what an instructor may be able to accomplish in the classroom.

#### 4. Review of research in SDL for adult English language learners

Grow’s (1991) model provides guidance for educators in a formal classroom environment, but what about the less formal, although still explicitly educational, environment of a tutoring center? Research has now been conducted for several decades on incorporating learning strategy instruction into the English language classroom (see, e.g., O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Wenden, 1991), but a question arises what research has been done thus far regarding instruction in SDL for English language students, and specifically SDL that has imparting knowledge of language-learning strategies as an overt goal? What lessons can we learn? It is usually wise to not “reinvent the wheel” and instead try to learn from those who implemented something before us. In that spirit, this section provides an overview of selected research reports on SDL for adult English language learners in a variety of contexts. It is organized to answer a series of questions regarding explicit teaching of SDL, the use of SDL by successful language-learning students, and the use of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in SDL.

##### 4.1. Empirical research on instruction in SDL

We know that research on S<sup>2</sup>R has provided evidence for the assumption that students benefit from explicit strategy training. Does empirical research also support the idea that many English-language learners need to be explicitly taught self-directedness? In a US-based study, Grover, Miller, Swearingen, and Wood (2014) found in a survey of over 400 adult ESL students that SDL strategies for improving English outside of class were infrequently used, if at all, even among those students who had access to a computer at home. Notably, none of these students were currently enrolled in degree-seeking study, although some of them were taking English to prepare for college entry. The research did not seek to see what happened if students were taught to use techniques for SDL, but it did affirm empirically the suspicion that many students do not know how to study English outside of the context of their English classes.

Another insightful study was conducted by Yarahmadzahi and Bazleh (2012) at their Iranian university, in which an experimental group was explicitly taught SDL techniques, following Bett's autonomous learner model (Betts & Kercher, 1999, cited in Yarahmadzahi & Bazleh, 2012), parallel to their normal English lessons, while the control group was only taught English. The post-research testing showed a significant increase in English language skills, as well as a significant increase in readiness for SDL as measured by the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS). The researchers concluded that, even though their research was small-scale, explicitly teaching SDL techniques and promoting learner autonomy would be a beneficial change for the Iranian educational system overall, especially as space for students at Iranian universities becomes increasingly competitive.

In a study not related to language learning but relevant to the topic of teaching SDL, Bambacas and Sanderson (2011) investigated the preferences of groups of distance MBA students for their learning activities, and the results showed that the more self-directed aspects of the program, including those not directly supervised by the professor as well as those that were peer-to-peer related, were the least popular. The researchers concluded that the professors, and the MBA program itself, have a responsibility to "explain that these arrangements are important in the context of the outcomes of the program to help them to develop skills and dispositions related to independent, critical, and analytical learning" (Bambacas & Sanderson, 2011, p. 8). In the same way, an English language program should explain why employing SDL techniques is critical for success in many of the academic environments its students may be entering. This is true for the English language programs at UAB, especially considering that many of the students are bound for graduate work, which is characterized in most cases by an implicit expectation of high learner autonomy.

All of this shows that explicit teaching of SDL is needed, it is helpful for the student in learning English (especially if we add explicit training in LLS use), and it may be necessary for the student's navigation of numerous academic systems around the world. Now, a question arises whether we can identify characteristics of successful students who use SDL in an effort to pinpoint the sorts of outcomes that should be established for SDL training?

#### 4.2. Empirical research on characteristics of successful students who rely on SDL

First, it is worthwhile to consider two studies that link SDL abilities and language learning. A quantitative study in Turkey among undergraduate English language learners in two different universities revealed that autonomous learning was a clear predictor of academic success in both institutions, as was intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, the two together were shown to be extremely strong predictors of

academic success in language learning (Karatas, Alci, Yurtseven, & Yuksel, 2015). In addition, Gan's (2004) quantitative study of 357 Chinese university sophomores, which employed questionnaires and English proficiency test scores, found that the students' self-perception of confidence and SDL abilities were significantly associated with English learning achievement. Specifically, SDL strategies related to cognitive learning and to managing effort were seen to be the best predictors of success. We can relate these predictors of success to the S<sup>2</sup>R model's meta-strategies in the cognitive and affective dimensions (Oxford, 2011). However, the specific self-regulated learning strategies that led to success in this specific context were not delineated.

In a separate qualitative study that sought to investigate specifics of successful SDL strategies, Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons (2004) focused on two groups of university-level students recruited from two separate universities in China. The group of 18 students, representing a small sample size typical of qualitative research, included nine successful and nine unsuccessful language learners, who were identified on the basis of English proficiency test scores. Researchers followed their language learning through interviews, journals, and follow-up emails. The researchers found that, among other characteristics, successful English students were able to set specific language-learning objectives for themselves. They also found that these students valued what they called "language sense," which was being able to use the right language at the right time without having to overthink it. Importantly, all of the successful students felt that a person could develop this language sense by reading English newspapers and watching English television news broadcasts, activities done independently of formal instruction (Gan et al., 2004, p. 234). These participants also described high motivation coming from intrinsic factors as well as external pressures, while the unsuccessful students only discussed extrinsic motivators. The researchers observed that the successful students employed a much wider range of practice activities and had a deeper understanding and use of learning strategies, which they felt was tied to the "practical command" of English that was the desired outcome of study. Conclusions from the study included the important recommendation that teachers should provide "learning strategy training that attempts to teach less successful language learners to use the strategies characterizing their more successful peers" (Gan et al., 2004, p. 240).

Determining overall characteristics and use of LLS of successful self-directed English language learners is helpful, as language educators can plan to purposefully promote the teaching of strategies in tandem with training in SDL. However, many tutoring labs/self-access centers also incorporate CALL through various technologies. Thus, it makes sense to offer a brief overview of research focusing on the use of CALL in SDL, which is the aim of the following subsection.



#### 4.3. Empirical research on technology in SDL

One qualitative study undertaken by Tse (2012) at a university in Malaysia investigated the possibilities of providing an online CALL lab for students to promote SDL. It was found that a newly-created, online self-access center at an English language institute received very low usage, although tutors were on standby for individual online consultations. However, Tse (2012) described no training for the students on the benefits of such SDL through the online English help center, only indicating that it was provided. The researcher concludes that students must be trained on how CALL can be used for SDL and must be made "conscious of the importance of self-learning" (Tse, 2012, p. 165).

In contrast, in Turkey, a research study by Mutlu & Eroz-Tuga (2013) exposed a group of university students to explicit training in self-directed language-learning techniques, specifically delivered through CALL in order to spur the participants' use of technology to increase opportunity for self-study. The study showed a major increase in the students' autonomy, an enhanced understanding of LLS, and a much higher incidence of self-study using CALL. As the researchers explained, the findings showed that the students in the SDL group "were highly teacher-dependent before the strategy training; however, the . . . students underwent a gradual change in their behavior from teacher-dependent to teacher-independent during the language learning strategy training process" (Mutlu & Eroz-Tuga, 2013, p. 118). Interestingly, the students reported that the idea of working on SDL in the self-access computer center at the university, after classes, was deeply unappealing because of fatigue; however, the self-study materials available to the students to use at home were satisfying to them.

In another relevant and recent study, Ramamurthy and Rao (2015) investigated the use of smartphones in developing learner autonomy. The researchers found that the use of such devices assisted the learners' critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, and collaboration skills, even though this group of students still felt quite reliant on their teachers to learn English completely. While this was a small study with limited impact, it does indeed suggest that considering ways to encourage students to use their smartphones to engage in creative SDL may be a beneficial angle of training as well.

#### 5. A framework for teaching SDL to language students

As can be seen from the above, research findings show that explicit teaching of SDL is successful, that successful language learners do use LLS aiding SDL, and that CALL can be used to encourage students to engage in SDL. What should be considered now is how to actually teach SDL techniques. In the qualitative study

by Gan et al. (2004) mentioned above, the researchers suggested that a significant issue for teachers to explore is the role of teacher-student interaction in facilitating successful use of SDL. Their research, the success with explicit teaching of SDL techniques reported by other studies overviewed in this paper, and the decades of research exploring the benefits of explicit teaching of LLS, support the idea that teachers (or tutors, in a tutoring/self-access center) can play an active, significant, and empirically verified role in teaching SDL skills to their students. Indeed, in the study by Grover et al. (2014) also discussed above, in which it was revealed that the participants did *not* use SDL techniques on their own frequently or with intention, the researchers declared: "It is incumbent on the instructor to help students make the connection between learning independently and how this ability can enrich their daily life" (p. 17). Since this study concerned English language learning, the researchers seem to suggest that autonomous learning would enrich English language use in daily life, as it would do for English language program students as well. We can recognize that our classroom subject, if we follow Grow's (1991) model, could be LLS rather than developing students' autonomy in learning Shakespeare or another academic topic. So, how should English language teachers go about teaching self-directed language learning strategies? How do we apply the model to the English language classroom, and then ultimately, to a tutoring center context?

Nakata (2010) suggests a framework for teaching self-regulation to English language learners. This framework has much in common with Grow's (1991) stages of emergent self-directedness, and, as the model is directly related to learning English, it is worth exploring in more detail, first in general for the language classroom, then with the tutoring/self-access center environment in mind. The first stage in the framework is the *preparation stage*, in which the teacher comes to understand the students' backgrounds, is careful to consider the safety of the classroom environment, directs the students in learning activities to help them achieve a basic understanding of the language, and helps provide intrinsic motivation, which can come, for example, from enjoying the class, liking the teacher, or understanding the need for the skill for educational purposes. The preparation stage looks similar to Grow's (1991) Stage One in which the teacher takes the role of a coach and the classroom is teacher-centered (Grow, 1991). Many of our students arrive at our programs as teacher-dependent learners such as these. In the second stage, the *developmental stage*, the teacher begins helping students set goals, ensuring opportunities for students to work collaboratively, working on techniques for cognitive self-direction, and providing opportunities to experience the satisfaction of actually communicating in English (Nakata, 2010). There are many ways in which Nakata's second stage resembles elements of Grow's (1991) Stages Two and Three, some of which are goal-setting, facilitating

group study, assisting with the development of learning strategies, and applying learning to real problems, to name but a few (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). The final stage is the *self-regulated stage*, in which the teacher is more of a language-study advisor, providing students with lots of opportunities for varied, challenging, and/or creative tasks as well as for engagement in SDL (Nakata, 2010). This stage closely resembles Grow's (1991) Stage Four, characteristic of highly self-directed learners, in which learning through discovery is promoted, and the teacher offers expertise and monitoring, but only as needed (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

These are well-articulated guidelines, and as Grow (1991) explained, looping back and jumping forward between stages in the classroom will facilitate moving all students, whatever level they may manifest at the time, towards increased self-directedness. In the following section, I will try to show how this model can be applied to the planning and implementation of a tutoring or self-access center.

## 6. Application for the learning resource center at UAB

Firstly, I believe that the emphasis on the teacher's active role in helping students acquire SDL skills and LLS, which has been continuously re-emphasized in this paper, is important for the learning resource center at UAB. We need to explicitly train two groups in two distinct ways at the beginning of each semester: first the tutors and then the students. At the beginning of each semester in each tutor-training workshop, held before new tutors are allowed to begin working with students, the importance of leading students towards more autonomous study, and the tutor's crucial role in that process must be highlighted. The curriculum that is used for our tutor training does have an emphasis on helping students become independent learners, but I believe that the tutors should also be provided with the models proposed by Grow (1991) and Nakama (2010). This is because Grow's (1991) is a standard for SDL theorists and Nakama's (2010) is a very recent explication of a similar approach that is explicitly geared to the English language learning environment. Not only must tutors be trained, but students must also become aware of what a tutoring center is, of the role that academic support often plays in universities, and of the benefits of going to the tutoring center. In addition, they must be convinced that taking advantage of the center will help them become more autonomous in their learning, which is a major characteristic of successful academic study in many university systems – certainly, it is needed for meeting the expectations of the American academic environment in which UAB is situated. In her presentation devoted to a successful tutoring center given at TESOL 2016, Zastezhko (2016) stressed the importance of orienting the students to the role of tutoring and self-directed study upon arrival at an English language program. We

are planning to include this component in our initial orientation for all English language students at UAB, as well as in ongoing orientation classes. Furthermore, students in the pre-matriculation program will be required to attend a certain number of formal workshops in the learning resource center, so we can also cover strategies for SDL explicitly. The workshop can also help provide motivation to try to use these strategies by explaining that studies, such as those discussed in this paper, show a direct link between active implementation of SDL strategies and successful L2 learning. In addition, we can consider administering the *Language Style Survey* (Cohen, Oxford, & Chi, 2002) or similar self-assessment tools to all students.

Secondly, tutors need to implement the model of *cognitive apprenticeship* explained by Oxford (2016), which involves a more knowledgeable person helping a novice move towards increased autonomy. This can happen by sharing specific learning strategies with the novice, helping the novice set goals, scaffolding for the novice, and in general guiding the novice in the area of learning until the student is able to proceed autonomously. This sort of social learning, as Oxford (2016) acknowledges, is closely related to Vygotsky's (1978) foundational work on self-regulation and social learning, helping the student transverse the *zone of proximal development*, or the "distance that can be covered with assistance and cannot be traversed by the learner alone" (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Oxford, 2016, pp. 33-34). Learning resource center tutors can be deliberate in helping their students manage the growth needed to move towards increased self-directedness in their English language learning. They can also work one-on-one to help students identify the LLS that they do use, suggesting how they can transfer those strategies to different situations but also pointing to new and potentially useful strategies that they may want to learn and apply.

Finally, I believe that the learning resource center needs to be full of resources that are not only physically accessible to students, but also accessible remotely. If we want to promote SDL among this population of learners, we must fully consider the likelihood that tired students may not choose to come and work on English in our tutoring center on their own. Instead, we need to purposefully present to students suggestions for autonomous learning which resemble the ways in which they enjoy using technology on their own, in addition to specific training on LLS that would help them make the most of a CALL environment.

## 7. Conclusions and implications

As the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes once said, "Of making many books there is no end" (Ecc. 12:12b English Standard Version). In a similar vein, I am keenly aware that the present paper has not at all exhausted the examination of possible models that apply SDL to the language learning classroom, the vast body of research on LLS, self-regulation, and autonomy in language learning, the specifics of which LLS should

be taught to students, the best practices for strategy instruction, or research that could further illuminate the ways we can use technology in a tutoring/self-access center. Therefore, more questions for further research and implementation concerning this particular case of implementation of a learning research center will be identified. We obviously still have much to accomplish in order to continue to build the best possible resource for students. However, this paper does give us two strong models (Grow, 1991; Nakata, 2010) for use in implementing SDL training in a tutoring/self-access center, it provides empirical evidence to back up the idea that tutors can play a strong, purposeful role in training students to become self-directed, and shows that all of this does tie in strongly with decades of research in the field of language teaching, and strategic, self-regulated language learning in particular (Oxford, 2011, 2017). The UAB English Language Programs can offer a learning resource center that encourages students to study independently, as long as we plan to actively train students how to analyze tasks, creatively identify and implement strategies to meet task requirements, and evaluate the utility of specific strategies in context. While tutors do not necessarily have to learn the nuances about how these concepts fit together, training students in SDL can only happen if we also train tutors on the basics of how to enable learners to become self-directed, self-regulated, autonomous, strategic learners. Additionally, we must also build a center that promotes language study through careful use of technology and resources that allow the student to learn not only on-site but also while physically removed from class and the learning resource center itself. By including these elements in our center's activities and design, students can be empowered to demonstrate autonomy and self-regulation as they independently implement principles of self-direction and strategic language learning.

This article has presented interlocking theories and practices and has applied them to a tutoring and self-access center in an urban university in southeastern United States. How does this information relate to other English language programs elsewhere? What implications exist for institutions of adult English language education in other places, where cultural belief systems, customs, and expectations are different from those in the university that served as the case in point for this article? Fortunately, since much of the empirical research reviewed derives from a wide variety of global English language teaching environments, we can project that this issue is indeed relevant and applicable to an equally wide variety of English language programs. Thus, below I provide five key implications of this discussion:

1. Empirical research validates that English language learners worldwide can greatly benefit from being explicitly taught strategies for self-directed learning.
2. In order to teach students to be self-directed in their L2 learning, language learning strategy instruction must be an integral part of the training.

3. Assessment of both the level of readiness for SDL and awareness or use of LLS would be useful as a precursor to working with a student on these skills.
4. Teachers can play a role in this, but because of the one-on-one nature of tutoring services, trained English language program tutors can play a truly impactful role in helping students' development in this area. In addition, self-access services available to students will be most useful if students are first trained in principles of SDL, and if the self-access services are designed to make use of technology that students find relevant and that may be accessed both on- and off-site of the English language program.
5. Grow's (1991) model of strategic self-directed learning, Nakata's (2010) framework for self-regulated language learning, and Oxford's (2011, 2017) model for strategic self-regulation together provide excellent resources for outlining the steps and imagining the processes that students take towards developing autonomy in using strategies for language learning. The models can be applied to a wide variety of teaching and learning environments, since they offer frameworks that can be flexible and iterative, and since each of them attempts to describe a process rather than implying that L2 learning is unchangeably linear.

In summary, it is time for SDL to be increasingly included in our research and conversations in relation to language learning strategies, learner autonomy, and self-regulation. Widely recognized in major theories of adult education, the role SDL can play in shaping the language learning experiences of our students should be fully embraced. In addition, if programs consider adding new tutoring or self-access centers to their slate of curricular support options, or if they are considering the efficacy of the tutoring/self-access centers they already fund, the deep impact that including explicit training on self-direction, especially in relation to language learning strategy use, is of great significance. As we seek to support language learning success in a myriad of English language teaching environments available worldwide, let us further consider the implementation of these ideas in an effort to help our students become increasingly self-directed as well as truly and deeply strategic.

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